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ABSTRACT

Elementary education in Malta is briefly discussed in terms of: (1) recent innovative developments; (2) Malta's education system; and (3) areas of innovation in primary schools. Section 1 concerns compulsory education and special education in primary schools. Section 2 discusses the expansion of kindergarten education and the organizational structure of primary education. Section 3 covers the primary school curriculum, the structure of classes, pupil assessment and promotion policy, teacher education, in-service teacher education, the role of school inspectors, school-home communication, and the main objectives of innovation in primary education on Malta. (RH)

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Project No. 8:
"Innovation in primary education"

Primary education in Malta

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Strasbourg, 17 June 1988 DECS/EGT (86) 30 rev.

COUNCIL FOR CULTURAL CO-OPERATION

Project No. 8 on

"Innovation in primary education"

PRIMARY EDUCATION IN MALTA

Report submitted by

Mr. Michael C. SULTANA
Education Officer
in charge of primary schools

A. INNOVATION IN PRIMARY EDUCATION

1. RECENT DEVELOPMENTS:

Although many changes have taken place over the past years at all levels of education in Malta, yet I shall limit myself to define recent areas of innovation introduced in primary schools.

1.1. With the implementation of the 1974 Education Act, education became compulsory for all Maltese children between the ages of 6 and 16.

Article 9 of the same Education Act, ensured that education provided in Government schools is free by law. Besides free tuition at all levels of Kindergarten, Primary, Secondary and Trade schools, Technical Institutes, New Lyceums and the University, this Act ensured that henceforth all students would have:

a. free loan of textbooks: at Kindergarten, Primary, Secondary and Trade School levels.

b. free writing materials - at Kindergarten and Primary levels.

c. free transport - for all students up to compulsory school age.

d. free midday-break supervision for all full-time students below University level.

e. free milk for all students.

f. free School Medical Service which is composed of School Medical Officers and School nurses. This service, which is run for the Education Department by the Medical and Health Department, keeps a constant check on the health of all children in kindergartens and primary schools by means of regular visits. Students in Secondary and Trade schools benefit from this service as and when the need arises or when referred by the Head of School.

1.2. Special Education in Primary Schools

The 1974 Education Act (art 17) also specifies that where a child, for whom education is compulsory, should owing to some mental, emotional or physical handicap, receive education in a special school. The parent is to register the child who shall have to attend the special school best suited for him.

The Education Department runs a number of special schools and services for handicapped children. These include:

a. Special schools, or units, for handicapped children - the educationally subnormal, the maladjusted, the impaired of hearing, the visually impaired and the physically handicapped.

b. Hospital classes.

c. Integrated classes for the educationally subnormal.

d. A peripatetic service for home-bound children.

It is the policy of the Education Department to open integrated 'opportunity' classes for handicapped children in primary schools where this education is to the greatest benefit of the child.

Thus, full attention is also being given to the needs and to the instruction of physically and mentally handicapped children. Home teaching to below school-age handicapped children and advice to their parents has also recently been expanded. Children who have to stay away from home for long periods because of sickness receive regular lessons at home or in hospital.

In line with modern educational developments in this field, educationally subnormal children are, as far as possible, being given special treatment in normal schools so as to give them the opportunity to integrate with other children. Such schools have been equipped with the necessary facilities to cater for these children.

B. THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN MALTA

KINDERGARTEN AND PRIMARY EDUCATION

1.1. The expansion of the educational system in Malta during the seventies included the introduction of kindergarten facilities for children aged four years in a number of towns and villages. (This service has since been made available to children all over the island). Thus all children, including those coming from culturally deprived sections of the community, were enabled to receive early formative preparation for their school years. This service also made it possible for working mothers to continue in productive employment.

It is intended to further expand kindergarten centres, particularly in new residential areas and large districts where the number of children of kindergarten age has risen considerably. It is also expected that in the early stages of the Plan kindergartens will be able to take three year olds as well.

Kindergarten Centres are, in most cases, attached to existing primary schools but are administratively run by an Education Officer in charge of Kindergarten and Infant Education. Classes, or kindergarten groups, are looked after by Kindergarten Assistants and the maximun number of these groups does not exceed 25 children on the enrolment register. Attendance at such classes is voluntary.

Kindergarten classes run on a whole day basis and follow the normal primary schools opening and closing times. The aim of kindergarten education is to socialise the child and to provide opportunities for guided intellectual, emotional and physical development. Play and activity methods are promoted. There exists no formal curriculum, but due attention is given at the proper time to preparing children for primary education.

1.2. The organisational structure of the existing school network at the Primary level has also been updated to take due account of the significant increase in the number of children of primary school age. At the same time due action has been taken to improve and modernise both the content and teaching methods of primary education in line with international trends. Among other innovations, greater emphasis is being placed on group work to stimulate collective activity while preserving the child's autonomy and sense of responsibility.

A programme to modernise equipment and facilities in primary schools has also been launched while locally-produced teaching materials, aids and text-books are being used to the fullest extent possible.

Primary education begins at age 5 and lasts for six years, that is, Year One up to Year Six. Primary schools generally cater for the population of a particular self-contained community or parish. In the smaller concentrations, one schools caters for all grades - Year 1 to 6, including Kindergartens. In the bigger centres, schools are generally divided into 'A' schools which cater for Kindergartens and Years 1 to 3, and 'B' schools which cater for Years 4 to 6. This division also reflects the emphasis in the curriculum and the general approach to teaching.

C. AREAS OF INNOVATION IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

With a view to making the educational system more dynamic and effective, several educational innovations have recently been introduced. Areas of innovation include curriculum development, structure of classes, integration of subjects, individualisation of instruction, pupil assessment, teacher training and school-home communication.

1.1. The School Curriculum

A major innovation in primary education has been the development of a suitable curriculum which constitutes a broad guide for the teacher over the scholastic year. The Primary School curriculum consists of the following subjects: Maltese, English, Mathematics, Physical Education, Religion, Social Studies, History, Geography, Environmental Studies, Nature Study and Elements of Science. Art and Craft, Music and Singing.

In the first three years the emphasis is on reading, writing, numeracy and English. More formal studies (to include History, Geography and elements of Science) are introduced in the third and fourth years. Activity and creativity methods, together with extra curricular activities, are promoted.

Th new curriculum underlines the idea that there is no fixed or stable curriculum for every school. Teachers are encouraged to modify and adjust it according to their environment and the needs of their particular class. Teachers are also reminded that the curriculum should be under continuous development.

1.2. Structure of Classes

The consturction of spacious new school premises during the past years has made it possible that classes do not exceed 30 pupils each and in rural schools the teacher/pupil ratio is even much lower. The Primary School teacher teaches all subjects on the curriculum and is in charge of his class for the whole time. There are, however, peripatetic services to help teachers in Physical Education, Art and Music. Remedial Education on a withdrawal system is available in some schools, while in others, Integrated classes of educationally subnormal children (strictly speaking belonging to the Special Education sector of the Education Department) are functioning.

1.3. Pupil assessment and promotion policy

Classes are generally streamed by ability depanding on the size of the school. Half yearly and annual examinations are used to assess pupils' achievements. From Year 3 upwards, annual examinations are run on a national basis (the same paper on the subject is set for all children in the same grade).

Notwithstanding the above, a general promotion policy has been established since we strongly believe in the'individualisation of instruction' policy and the many shortcomings of 'Retention' or 'class repetition' practice. Children are made to repeat only in exceptional circumstances and after serious consultations among teachers, parents and the Education Officer in charge of Special Education. Pupils who perform at a very low level are further 'screened' and placed in special classes with a curriculum more suited to their abilities.

With the implementation of the Education Act, Secondary education was made available to all children who complete the 6 year Primary School course. Education at this level is available in two types namely:

a. the recently introduced selective secondary education in Junior Lyceums for the brighter and more promising students. (Admission to such schools is through a competitive examination) and

b. non selective, general, comprehensive secondary education based on area schools.

In the two types of school, the course is of 5 years' duration and leads, in the case of the Junior Lyceums and more motivated students in other secondary schools, to the General Certificate of Education and the Malta Matriculation examinations at 'Oridianry Level'.

1.4. Teacher Training.

With the introducation of the Worker Student system, the course of studies leading to the degree of Bachelor of Education (Honours) of the Faculty of Education of the University of Malta was extended over 5 years. The system alternates 5½ months of study and 5½ months of work. The work phase is carried out in the Education Departments during which students gain first hand experience in actual classroom situations.

The course is organised on the unit-credit system and comprises five major subjects or areas, namely:

i. Educational Theory and Pedagogy (Educational Psychology, Socio-Cultural Aspects of Education, Pedagogy)

ii. Main Subject specialisation(Content, Pedagogy)

iii. Subsidiary Subject

iv. Teaching Practice

v. Dissertation.

The general principles underlying teacher training is that the Primary School teacher is a generalist who teachers all subjects of the curriculum. However, all teachers do not receive identical training. They are given the opportunity to make certain choices which give them different competence. They also specialise in particular subjects or areas of study.

1.5. Continuous Education of Teachers.

The Education Department and the Faculty of Education also run a number of in-service courses for teachers independently of or in collaboration with each other. These courses are mainly of an 'ad hoc' nature and are held according to needs. These include:

a. Evening Diploma courses for teachers, which are of two years' duration. They are generally intended to update retrain teachers.

b. Day-release in-service courses for teachers intended to update teachers in the subjects which they teach.

c. Seminars and lectures organised by the Education Department and given by visiting foreign lecturers.

d. Courses for the initial and recurring in-service training of Kindergarten Assistants.

Besides the above courses, great use is also made of scholarships and bursaries abroad, often provided by foreign governments and institutions through bilateral agreements for the further training and updating of Education Department personnel in the principles and methods concerning educational developments and curriculum subjects.

1.6. School Inspectors

The Education Officers (former Inspectors of Schools), whose main role was the inspection and evaluation of teachers, have now assumed the role of advisors and animators. The emphasis is given to guidance and staff development through individual advice, organisation of in-service courses and the preparation of textbooks suited for local needs. They also monitor school progress and plan curricula and syllabi. They work in close collaboration with the Ministry of Education.

1.7. School Home Communication

A close communication has of recent years been established between schools and homes by the setting up of Parent Teacher Associations in schools. It is beleived that strong links between these two components will make children and parents see school as an important part of their life, as something for which they should feel responsible and which they will want to improve.

Since the life of children is mainly divided between two environments, that is, the home and the school, it is in these two places that children pass the greater part of their time. Consequently, the home and the school are the most important elements that could have the greatest effect on the moulding of the character and personality of children.

When encouraging the setting up of Parent Teacher Associations in schools, the Education Department had this main objective in mind, that is, 'that parents and the teachers of their children associate together and get to know one another better to ensure the best academic education and proper upbringing of children'. Parents are kept informed about school decisions and activities through school bulletins or specially convened meetings at which the education and upbringing of children is discussed according to their diverse duties. The P.T.A., as a body united in a common ideal, strives to find ways and means how it can be of moral and material help to the school.

The Main Aims and Objectives of Innovation in Primary Education

It is a fact that innovation in Primary Education in Malta was prompted by radical changes in contemporary society and the challenge children have to cope with due to new discoveries of science and technology. Children's greater exposure to the mass media, their vulnerability in the face of changing patterns of family life and their earlier maturation, all call for the urgent need of innovation with a view to adapting teaching to the new demands thus ensuring the necessary pedagogical and teaching continuity.

The main aims of innovation are meant to:

- ensure, apart from the acquisition of fundamental skills, the awakening and development of all skills, attitudes and knowledge necessary for the development of the child's capabilities and for his well balanced life in society;

- lay the foundations and knowledge of skills in order to ensure the success of future studies;

- develop individual autonomy, a commitment to democratic values and a sense of social responsibility;

- help the child acquire an active attitude towards problems and to help him adapt to new situations;

- develop the child's eagerness to learn, his reflective ability, curiosity, self-reliance, creativity and sense of responsibility.

The process of implementing educational innovations is a slow and laborious one which presents many difficulties. A certain amount of resistance is also put up by those teachers who have to adopt new methods and approaches to their teaching techniques. However, through persuasion, good will and personal involvement of all those concerned, I am confident that such innovations will eventually produce the desired results.